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Book Review

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ALINE GUBRIUM, KRISTA HARPER and MARTY OTAÑEZ (eds), *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015. 296 pp. ISBN: 978 1629580555 (pbk).

This first page of this edited collection states that we have moved to ‘a new participatory turn’ (p. 15) and I think to myself, that’s interesting as it’s not really ‘new’ anymore; I thought we had moved beyond attractiveness of the visual to a post-popular juncture where researchers and practitioners are discussing the limitations of participatory visual methods (Packard, 2008). However, despite this, perhaps out-of-place, initial claim, the book itself is highly reflexive and does not present an easy marriage between the digital, the visual and the participatory, but instead seriously considers how the ‘imagined ideal of participation and the actual practice on the ground often manifest quite differently from one another’ (p. 21). The book presents a series of chapters that recognise the tensions between giving voice and the ethical concerns that mean voices are kept hidden; the values of creative forms to reach new audiences and break down barriers; and the importance of building a shared vocabulary so that researchers who apply multimodal participatory techniques can work together to refine and improve their craft.

Structurally the book is divided into six discreet sections, Digital Storytelling; Photovoice; Participatory Video; Participatory Mapping and GIS; Participatory Digital Archives; and Participatory Design Ethnography. The sixteen chapters representing these approaches have a resonance with Paulo Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’, being participatory in nature and centralising action and change. It is also important to note the book focuses on techniques that are dependent on forms of technology, the camera, digital recorder and GIS. This is not a collection that foregrounds the use of creative, handcrafted methods such as drawing, mapping, collaging and sandboxing, or working with personal artefacts, which are centralised in my own research (Mannay, 2016). Nonetheless, being located in visual, creative and participatory methods establishes a sense of commonality, which means researchers can learn from each other’s craft despite differences in modes and techniques.

I found Darcy Alexandra’s chapter, ‘Are we listening yet? Participatory knowledge production through media practice: encounters of political listening’, particularly insightful and engaging. Drawing on her work with asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, Alexandra asks ‘what impact does voice have if no one is listening?’ (p. 43). Employing digital storytelling, participants explored and documented their lives and developed short, first person documentary essays, which have been screened for diverse audiences. The idea of audiencing was central to the participants’ engagement long before the showing of the films, and

revelation and concealment were features of their storytelling, with performances of self linked to and defending against wider assumptions and categorisations of ‘the refugee’. In this way, digital stories should not be considered as ‘truth’ but as ways to consider what is true for the documentary maker and wider society. For Alexandra, within the entrenched hierarchies of voice, audiovisual productions can enable participants to invite the viewer to listen beyond categorical assumptions, creating new discourses and prompting audiences to consider the human cost of asylum policies.

Picturing Transactional Sex: Ethics, Challenges and Possibilities by Ciann Wilson and Sarah Flicker shifts from moveable data to the more static form of photography. The chapter focuses on the Let’s Talk About Sex project, which was undertaken in an immigrant enclave of Toronto, Canada, synonymous with poverty and crime. The authors argue that the voices of marginalised young people are continually muted by dominant media discourses that position them as pathological and problematic. Therefore, in this project they adopted Photovoice to allow the young women in the study to respond to these media discourses through their own images and narratives. Participants engaged with the activity, but the images and the accompanying narratives, as in Alexandra’s study, featured absences and silences. In relation to the audiencing of their work, participants actively performed the role of ‘good girls’ but in doing so they ‘reinscribed stereotypes that vilified or shamed other young women’ (p.83). Although the works were originally intended for public consumption, the perpetuation of stereotypes remained problematic, accordingly the researchers decided only to share the project in spaces of facilitated dialogue, where issues could be unpacked and challenged, rather than simply displayed and left open to simplistic forms of interpretation.

I am unable to reflect on any more contributions in the space of a short review. However, importantly, overall the collection takes a critical approach that appreciates the danger of linking the visual and the digital with the participatory; not least because visual and narrative outputs cannot speak for themselves and they are produced through dynamic and unequal relationships (Lomax et al., 2011). I would have liked a concluding summary chapter that further explored some of these points, nevertheless, this book is a useful resource for students, researchers and others who adopt multimodal and participatory approaches in their research practice; and I will be adding this collection to my reading lists and drawing from it in my own work.

References

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